Reprinted from the Malaviya Commemoration

Volume 1932

The Economy of a South Indian Temple in the Cola Period

(With four plates)

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D.1641—THE GREAT TEMPLE IN 1798, Tan

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THE ECONOMY OF A SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLE IN THE CŌLA PERIOD

Every age finds its most characteristic expression in some institution or other. As the factory or the railway-station may be considered typical of the nineteenth century Europe, so the temple gave typical expression to the life and culture of the Southern India for several centuries in the middle ages. This modest study of a celebrated temple and its foundation may not be inappropriate as a tribute to the Founder of the Hindu University.

We are apt to think of the temple primarily as a religious institution; whether as perpetuating the memory of some dead hero, or as enshrining the symbol of the Absolute for rendering meditation upon it, easier or only as providing more or less comfortable dwelling places for a numerous pantheon of superhuman beings whom it is wise to placate in various ways, the temple rests on some form of religious belief for its foundation. Lacking Vedic sanction almost entirely, the practice of worshipping images may have grown up under the stimulus of Buddhism which, while it attacked Vedic sacrifices, in its later form, encouraged the idea that particular places and objects are holy, and countenanced the use of images. Worship in temples, however, never attained the importance in Hinduism that church services attained in Christianity. In later times, such worship came to be overlaid with many *tantric* forms, some of them debasing in character; and there has been present at all times a general feeling that worshipping in temples is not of the essence of the highest religion of the Hindus, and the *arcaka* has always taken a place below the *yājñika* and the *śrotriya* in popular estimation.

It is on the secular side and as a social institution that the temple is seen to have filled in the past a considerable place in the economy of national life. Southern India is rich in its ancient temples, and the walls of these usually bear inscriptions of exceptional interest to the historian. The great temple of Tanjore, 'the best designed of all the great South Indian temples,' is unique in many ways. When it was built, it was, as doubtless it was meant to be, the largest structural temple in Southern India. It is, after nearly a thousand years, in a perfect state of preservation and has not, owing to a lucky chance, fallen a prey to the ravages of time and man. We know more about this temple than about any other single structure of its kind. The numerous inscriptions on its walls have been collected and, for the most part, published *in extenso* with admirable care and scholarship by Dr. Hultzsch and Mr. Venkayya in Volume II of the South Indian Inscriptions. With their aid we shall see what the world owes to the piety, and the thoughtfulness, and, it may be, the vanity, of perhaps the greatest of a long line of great kings, the Cōḷas.

The Great Temple of Tanjore rose out of the imagination of its founder, from whom it took its name Rājarājēśvara.[1] There was no shrine of ancient renown on the spot, and Tanjore had no place in the orthodox list of Śaiva shrines celebrated in the *Dēvāram* by the early apostles of Śaivism in the Tamil country.[2]

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[1] The practice of naming shrines after their founders seems to have been borrowed from South India, and extensively employed in the Indo-Chinese Peninsula in ancient times.

[2] A popular legend explains this by the story that Appar, one of these saints, was refused admission into the temple. (*Tanjore Gazetteer*, p. 271.)

That the king was fully conscious of the grandeur of his achievement becomes clear from the proud terms of his order issued on the twentieth day[1] of the twenty-sixth year of his reign, from his palace at Tanjore, calling upon his officials "to engrave on the walls of the Śrī-Vimāna of the stone-temple to Rājarājēśvara raised by us in Tanjāvūr, gifts by ourselves, by our elder sister, by our queens and by many others." With what thoroughness and minute attention to details this order was carried out in the reigns of Rājarāja and his equally illustrious son and successor Rājēndra is seen in the inscriptions themselves.

It was the boast of the Pallava king Mahendra I (c. 600—30 A.D.) that he made temples without brick and mortar, timber or iron,[2]—by which he meant the 'cave-temples' of which he scooped out several in the South. That brick temples survived up to relatively late times is borne out by the Cōḷa inscriptions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries furnishing examples of such temples being rebuilt in stone.[3] But very soon after the time of Mahendravarman I, much progress was effected in the art of constructing structural temples out of stone which, as Prof. Dubreuil points out,[4] must have been found more difficult in those days than hewing off solid blocks of granite into desired forms. The Rājasimhēśvara at Kāñcīpuram and the shore temple at Mahābalipuram may be taken to provide a fair idea of the progress achieved in

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[1] *S.I.I.*, II, i. Mr. Venkayya has shown that this was the first record to be engraved on the upper tier of the Northern and Western walls of the *Vimāna* (*S.I.I.*, II, Introduction, p. 14), and that none of these inscriptions was actually engraved before the 29th year of Rājarāja.

[2] *Ep. Ind.*, XVII, p. 14.

[3] 123 of 1900.

[4] *Archaeologie Le Sud de l'Inde*, *Tom.* I, p. 31.

the planning and construction of structural temples out of stone nearly three centuries before Rājarāja came to the throne.

Bewildered by the size and complexity of latter-day temples dominated by the somewhat hidebound rules of a decadent *śilpaśāstra*, Fergusson remarked that in 'nine cases out of ten, Dravidian temples are a fortuitous aggregation of parts, arranged without plan, as accident dictated at the time of their erection,' and that 'the one great exception to this rule is to be found at Tanjore' where the temple 'was commenced on a well-defined and stately plan, which was persevered in till its completion'; and these remarks have often been quoted[1] with approval. Yet all that we know of temples and temple architecture before the tenth or even the thirteenth century belies these remarks. The temple of those times was generally a small and elegant structure surmounted by a *vimāna* standing in an open court-yard, with the minor shrines, if any, disposed in convenient corners or in a row along covered verandahs inside the wall enclosing the court. Such structures do not seem to have lacked either plan or unity, and were anything but 'a fortuitous aggregation of parts.'

At the time of its construction, the Tanjore temple was unique not so much for the greater definiteness of design or unity of plan which marked it off from other temples in existence, as for its over-powering size, which no doubt gave rise to tremendous technical problems, solved only by a very lavish expenditure of resources in men and material. To have conceived a great temple in that proportion, to have insured by cautious designing that beauty was not sacrificed to size, and to have built

[1] See, *e.g.*, *Tanjore Gazetteer*, p. 270.

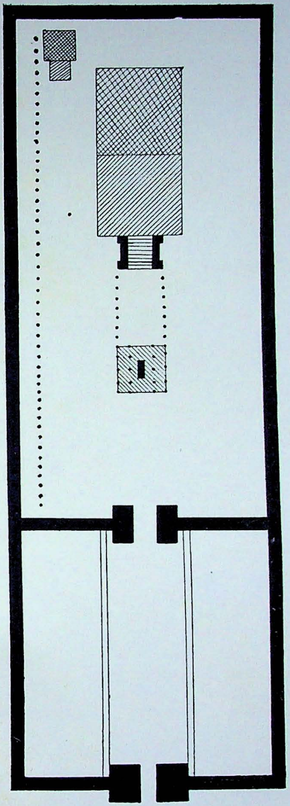

Diagram Plan of the Great Temple

[From Fergusson]

it altogether of very fine granite from *upāna* to *stūpi* in a city far removed from any good quarry[1] of building stone, this is the glory of Rājarāja and his architects.

Of the details of construction we have no record. A grandson of the king, Rājendradeva, ordered nearly half a century later, about A.D. 1058, that a daily allowance of paddy was to be given from the treasury of the temple to a troop of actors who had to enact a drama, called *Rājarājēśvara-nāṭaka*, on the occasion of the *Vaikāśi* festival in the temple. It is conceivable that this *nāṭaka* was a popular presentation of scenes from the construction of the temple. Even now, during the festival in the month of *Vaikāśi* (May-June), a drama is enacted in the temple on a platform near the main (eastern) entrance into the courtyard of the temple, though the memory of Rājarajēś-vara-nāṭaka does not seem to have survived.

The hamlet Śārappaḷḷam (the scaffold-hollow), four miles from Tanjore, is said to take its name from the fact that the single block of granite on the top of the tower weighing 80 tons, was conveyed to its position up an inclined plane commencing from the village. We learn from the inscriptions only this, that a considerable part of the enclosing wall (*tiruccuṟṟumāḷigai*) of the temple was built under the supervision of a Brahmin military official Kṛṣṇan Rāman by name.[2]

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[1] Actually the stones seem to have been brought from the quarries of Mammalai, eight miles S.-E. of Trichinopoly, over a road of nearly thirty miles. (*Tanjore Gazetteer*, p. 271.)

[2] *S. I. I.*, II, Nos. 31, 33 and 45. Mr. Venkayya (*Ibid.*, p. 13, *Introd.*) argues, rather inconclusively, that because this record is engraved twice on the South enclosure and once on the west enclosure 'we may conclude that these two enclosures were built at different times by the king's general.' He adds: 'There is no such inscription on any part of the North or

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It was in the twenty-fifth year of his reign A.D. 1009-10, on the 275th day of the year, that the king handed over the copper-pot for the finial at the top of the *Vimāna*. It weighed about 235 lbs. and was overlaid with gold plate of the weight of 2926½ *kalañju* or nearly 35 lbs. Troy. This is the only evidence we have on which to base our inferences about the time when the construction was finished. The length of time taken up in the construction, the quantity and nature of the labour employed, on these and other such subjects, our curiosity must apparently for ever remain unsatisfied. A careful inspection of some parts of the temple shows that much of the sculpture work must have been started after the dressed stones were got into position in the main structure ; and if this surmise is correct, workmen must have been engaged in carrying out the scheme of ornamentation for a considerable time after the completion of the *Vimāna*, and this may well have been so. On the other hand, the inscription tells us

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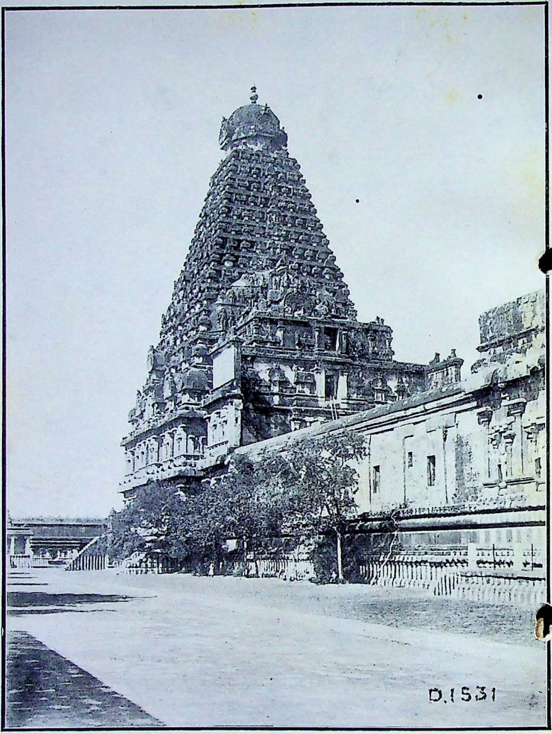
east enclosure, and it is not impossible that they were built by the king himself.' It is strange that so experienced an epigraphist should have overlooked the express statement in the triplicate record of Kṛṣṇan Rāman that he built the enclosure to the order of the king—"*uḍaiyār śrī-Rāja-rāja dēvar-tiruvāy moḻindaruḷa.*" I am also unable to follow Mr. Venkayya's speculations on Rājarāja's relation to the authorities of the temple at Cidambaram (*Ibid.*, pp. 5 and 14). He thinks that the title Rājarāja and Śivapādaśekhara were conferred on him by the Cidambaram people, because "according to the *Kongudēśarājākkaḷ* the king made certain gifts to the Cidambaram temple in S. 926=A. D. 1004." Now the *Kongudēśa-rājākkaḷ* says that this king excelled Parāntaka in his gifts to Cidambaram, but gives no date for them ; it also explains the title Rāja-rāja, not as '*kubera*,' the friend of Śiva, as Mr. Venkayya does, but as 'king of kings,' and distinctly says that this title was earned by his conquest of other kings.



D.1531—Details of the Tower over the Sanctum of the GREAT TEMPLE, Tanjore.

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that some gifts like fly-whisks, bugles and so on, were made to the temple from the king's treasury as early as the twenty-third regnal year.

There can be no question that the Great Temple of Tanjore impresses us most by the grandeur and simplicity of the design, and the perfect style of its execution. The extensive court-yard enclosed within high stone walls is about 500 feet from east to west and is almost exactly half as broad. The towering *Vimāna*, which dominates the whole, rises near the western end of the court to a height of about 190 feet, and the square base that supports it measures almost exactly half this on its sides. The high basement provides for the entire structure and the simple but massive mouldings on its sides add to the imposing appearance of the whole composition, best appreciated from the southern side of the court-yard which is least encumbered by subsidiary structures. Notable among such structures, and later in point of time, are the bald shrine to Dakṣiṇāmūrti with its ugly stair leading up to the image enshrined originally in one of the niches of the *Vimāna*—an inconsiderable addition to the towering mass of stone, but enough to spoil the view of its original symmetry; and the exquisite temple of Subrahmaṇya (to the north of the main temple) which has evoked much praise by the excellence and elaborateness of its ornamental patterns. The small *maṇḍapa* in front of the main temple and another sheltering the big monolithic *nandi* in front of it are also, doubtless, later additions. It cannot be said that any of these additions, the fine temple of Subrahmaṇya not excepted, has improved the appearance of the ancient structure. The outer court of the temple, to the east of the one holding the main shrine, was used as an arsenal for a time by the French in 1772, and for about thirty years thereafter the English turned the temple into a camp. In 1801-02 the temple was purified and

reconsecrated by Raja Sarfoji.[1] For all these vicissitudes, however,—and there were doubtless others of which we have no record—the temple has suffered remarkably little damage. The mutilation of a few of the numberless sculptures is nothing by the side of the ruin that has overtaken the younger temple of Gangai-koṇḍa-cōḷapuram. The Tanjore temple has been preserved on the whole very much as its founder left it,[2] which is not true in the same measure of any other South Indian temple. Even the fort and the ditch, much as these may have been altered in later times, formed part of the original design of Rājarāja, as Karuvūr-dēvar mentions them in his hymn (*Tiruviśaippā*) on the Tanjore temple.

The Great Temple is even more remarkable for the simplicity and the elegance of its sculptures and ornamental designs, than for the majesty of its proportions. The tooling of the stone is so exquisitely delicate, that every detail, including the well-chiselled lettering of the inscriptions, stands out clear and sharp as on the day it left the sculptor's hands. An adequate study of the sculptures in this temple has not yet been made; but hasty opinions have been expressed that originally they were all Śaivite in character, and that the Vaiṣṇavite sculptures on the *Vimāna* and elsewhere must be considered later embellishments. The truth, however, is that, though himself an ardent devotee of Śiva, the king was not so sectarian as to exclude from the ornamentation on the walls of the Great Temple motifs drawn from the many beautiful Vaiṣṇava legends of the land. Scenes from the Buddha's life are

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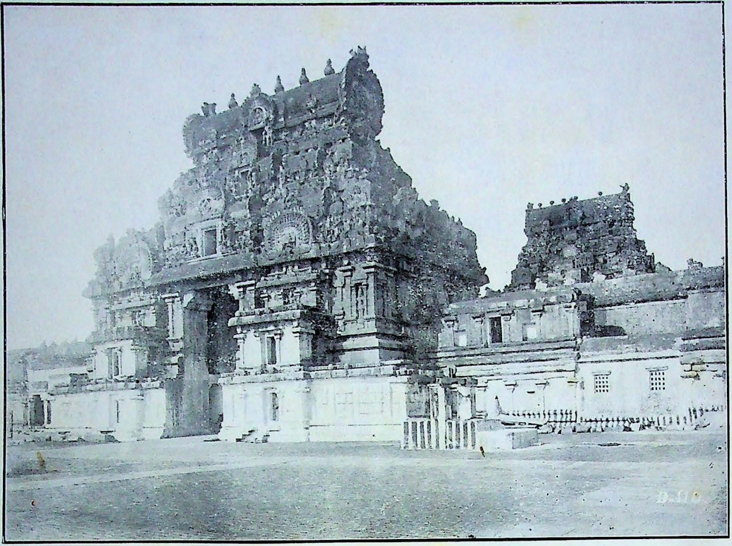
[1] Fergusson, I, 366.

[2] The *Tanjore Gazetteer* (p. 270) records a popular story about the figure of a Dane on the northern side of the tower, and suggests, what is most unlikely, that the Nāyaks erected the Vaiṣṇavite figures on the *Vimāna*.



D.110—South-West View of Inner GOPURAM, THE GREAT TEMPLE, Tanjore.

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seen depicted on the outer (eastern) side of the parapet enclosing the broad flight of steps to the south of the temple. The art of the painter was not forgotten but the paintings, at least such as we have traces of, were tucked away under the *Vimāna* in a dark passage round the *garbhagṛha* where they were discovered very recently by the pluck of a young scholar and artist.[1] As things move in this distracted and unfortunate country, it will be long before these fine frescoes in bright colours, the most considerable set of Hindu paintings of any antiquity so far brought to light in South India, become available for general study and criticism in proper reproductions.

The inexorable law of imperialism requires that the conquered must pay for the luxuries of the conqueror. Athens adorned herself at the expense of her 'allies'; Tanjore was beautified by Rājarāja largely at the expense of the countries newly subjected to his sway. Among the numberless gifts of gold and precious stones made by the king to the temple, several are stated to have come from the treasures captured by him in his campaigns in the Malai-nāḍ (hill-country) against the Cera and the Pāṇḍyas; and some from the campaign against Satyāśraya, the Cāḷukya king of the West.[2] The richest gifts that were made to the temple were by the king himself, his elder sister Kundavai and his numerous queens. The amount of treasure lavished on the temple in the shape of vessels and utensils of gold and silver, and in the form of jewelled ornaments is very large; and as if to set at rest our scepticism in this regard, Rājarāja and his son took care to give a full and detailed account of each of the items, great and small, that made

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[1] Mr. S. K. Govindaswami of the Annamalai University.

[2] *S. I. I.*, II, 1, paragraphs 34 and 92.

up the tale of their benefactions. No doubt, parts of this account are now lost to us; but what is left gives sufficient indication that the temple engrossed the mind of Rājarāja in the closing years of his life. By the twenty-ninth year of his reign, Rājarāja had perfected his arrangements for the endowment in perpetuity of the vast sums needed for the lavish routine of daily requirements in the great temple. He had presented, among other valuables, golden articles weighing 41,559 *kalañju*[1] or roughly 489 lbs. Troy; and jewels worth nearly 10,200 *kāśu*, equal to half as many *kalañju* in gold.[2] He had also given silverware of the total weight of 50,650 *kalañju*, nearly 600 lbs. Troy.[3] He had set apart lands in several villages throughout his extensive dominions, including Ceylon, yielding an annual income of 116,000 *kalam* of paddy, equal at prevailing prices to 58,000 *kāśu*, besides a cash income of 1,100 *kāśu*.

He had formed two long streets, the northern and the southern *Taḷiccēris* running east to west, and inhabited by four hundred dancing women impressed from the other *Taḷiccēris*[4] in the Cōḷa country and provided each

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[1] A *Kaḷañju* was about 68 grains under Rājarāja—Codrington, *Ceylon Coins and Currency*, p. 5.

[2] *S. I. I.*, II, 38, paragraph 48 gives the information: 15 manjāḍi=3/4 *pon*. A *pon* (*kaḷañju*) was equal to two *kāśu*. Codrington, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*

[3] It is by no means clear that silver was less in vogue than gold or precious stones. *Contra*, *S. I. I.*, II, p. 416 (Introdn. to No. 91.)

[4] *Taḷiccēri* seems to mean 'street of the temple' so called either because it adjoined the temple, or more probably, it was inhabited by the servants (*aḍiyār*) of the temple. This list of women, who were transferred to Tanjore, is interesting in many ways. It gives a clear idea of the temples, Śiva and Viṣṇu, in existence at the time and the names of women are a fine study in themselves.

with one house and one *vēli* of land, yielding an annual return of 100 *kalam* of paddy called a *pangu* (share). About 180 such *pangus* (shares) had been set apart for the maintenance of no fewer than 212 male servants for the temple comprising dancing-masters, musicians, drummers, barbers, goldsmiths, tailors,[1] accountants and so on. Among these were three persons to sing the *āriyam* (Sanskrit?) and four others to sing the *Tamiḻ*,—terms which seem to imply that already the sacred hymns of the Tamiḻ saints had received recognition as Drāviḍa-Vēdam and claimed equal rank with the original Veda. The king's elder sister, Parāntakan Kundavai Āḻvār, as she is called in the inscriptions, gave gold of the weight of nearly 10,000 *Kaḻanju* and jewels and utensils of the value of about 18,000 *Kāśu*. Others, queens and high officials in the royal service, made other gifts, recorded with equal care and precision on the stone walls and pillars of the temple. When we recall the nature and extent of the efforts and sacrifices that must have gone to the construction of this magnificent temple, the number of servants and attendants dependent on it after it came up, the method by which these were recruited from the different parts of the Cōḷa kingdom and the precise rules laid down for the regular maintenance of their supply, and the manner in which numerous villages all over the empire were linked up with the daily routine of the temple by having to send supplies to it on account of lands held or as interest on sums borrowed from the temple at various times, when we consider, further, how all the learning and the arts that flourished in the country were impressed into the service of this temple, we cannot

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[1] While the *Tayyān* of paragraphs 499-500 (*S. I. I.*, II, 66) is a tailor, the *pāṇan* of 506-9 is not a 'tailor,' as Hultzsch understands it, but a singer, who not only sang but danced to his tune. Note the names of Pāṇans ending in Śakkai.

fail to observe how the Great Temple came to hold, from its very inception, a prominent place in the polity of the land. The temple was meant to dominate Tanjore, as Tanjore dominated the rest of South India at the time; it was, indeed, the masterpiece of Rājarāja's rule.

Much information can be gathered from the inscriptions about the economic conditions, the prices, wages and currency, prevailing at the time, the standards of measure and weight, and so on. The *Kāśu*, equal to a half *kalañju* of gold, was the standard unit of currency, and the *akkam* was a coin which had a twelfth of the value[1] of the *Kāśu*. The 'lamp,' curiously enough, was often used as a unit of reckoning for minor endowments in temples and was the equivalent in value of 96 sheep, 48 cows or 16 buffaloes[2]; the normal price of a sheep (*āḍu*) seems to have been a third of a *kāśu*,[3] though at times two *akkam* were counted as the equivalent of an *āḍu*.[4] Cardamum was sold at 12 measures per *kāśu*; and cus-cus at about 50 lbs. for the same amount of money.[5] It should be observed that these prices[6] must have been reached by some method of averaging or standardization, as they are used for the regulation of perpetual endowments for services and supplies in the temple. Any doubt that such methods are too modern to have been practised so early must be set at rest by the fact that the device of adding a small sum to a large total for rounding the figure is clearly adopted in these inscriptions.[7]

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[1] *S.I.I.*, II, 6, para 15.

[2] *S.I.I.*, II, 63.

[3] *Ibid.*, 64.

[4] *Ibid.*, 95.

[5] *Ibid.*, 24.

[6] *Ibid.*, 37.

[7] The term used in this connection is 'ēṟṟam.' *S.I.I.*, II, 6, para 14.

The lands of the temple were marked off from neighbouring lands by means of boundary stones bearing the mark of the presiding deity, *Sūlam* (trident) in the case of Śiva, and the *Cakra* (*āḻi*) for Viṣṇu.[1]

This inadequate notice of a large subject may be brought to a close by some observations on the state of religious belief and practice of the time suggested by the inscriptions before us. The king was doubtless an ardent follower of the Śaiva religion. It is remarkable that South Indian Śaivism appears to have had, in those days, extensive connections with upper India. An inscription[2] of the nineteenth year of Rājēndra, the son of Rājarāja, records a magnificent gift of 2,000 *kalam* of paddy per annum to be shared among the *śiṣyas* and *praśiṣyas* of Śarva Śiva Paṇḍita, the worshipping priest of the Tanjore temple, whether their places of residence were in the Āryadēśa, the Madhyadēśa or the Gauḍadēśa, and places the entire charity under the trusteeship of the Śaiva ācāryas of the family of Śarva Śiva. Among the arrangements made by Rājarāja for the service in the temple was provision for a choir of 48 persons with two drummers for the recitation of sacred hymns (*tiruppadiyam viṇṇappanjeyya*),[3] each one being remunerated at the rate of three *kuṟuni* (24 measures) of paddy per diem. They were constituted into a self-regulating corporation, and the king ordered that if anyone among them died or migrated, the nearest relative of that person was to take his place in the choir, or, if he was not competent to do so, he was to appoint some one who could do it (*āḷiṭṭu*); in case no such relatives were available, the

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[1] *Ibid.*, 61, para 6; and *S. I. I.*, I, 59.

[2] *S.I.I.*, II, 20.

[3] *Ibid.*, 65.

other members of the choir were to choose some suitable person for the vacancy. All the persons of the choir, including the drummer, bore aliases ending in Śiva and, no doubt belonged to the class of Śivabrāhmaṇas so frequently mentioned in the Cōḷa records. Śaivaite though he was, Rājarāja was no narrow sectarian. He presented an image of Mahāviṣṇu to the temple[1] and admitted Vaiṣṇava and even Buddhist sculptures in the decoration of its *Vimāna* and basement. The larger Leyden grant furnishes clear proof of the friendly relations that subsisted between the king and the Buddhist monastery at Negapatam. There is much indirect evidence also in the hagiology of South Indian Vaiṣṇavism that the Vaiṣṇava divines of the period lived on friendly terms with the Cōḷa rulers, though occasional differences and disputes were not altogether unknown. Some Viṣṇu temples were also required to contribute their quota to make up the four hundred *taḷi-ccēri-ppeṇḍugaḷ* (temple-women) settled in Tanjore in the vicinity of the temple. A study of the images presented to the temple and described in great detail, of the highest interest to the iconographist, confirms the general impression of prevailing eclecticism in matters religious.

An image of Ardhanārīśvara, one of Brahmā and one of Sūrya are mentioned among them. Lastly, the icons of Naṭarāja (*āḍa vallān*), Patañjali, and of the Śaiva saints[2] including the three authors of the Dēvāram (*Tiruppadiyam*) imply that, on the whole, the age of Rājarāja was the heyday of the Śaiva revival in the south which reached its climax in the age of Śēkkiḷar.

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[1] *S.I.I.*, II, 52.

[2] The stories of Meypporuḷ-nāyanār and Śiruttoṇḍar are clearly implied by the icons detailed in *S.I.I.*, II, 40 and 43. See pages 19-20 and 39 of the Introduction to the volume by Venkayya.

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